**“The poetry of Sylvia Plath is intense, deeply personal, and quite disturbing.”**

Based on the poems I have studied for my Leaving Certificate, I completely agree with the above statement. I found Plath’s poetry to be filled with raw emotion and evidence of the mental turmoil she suffered. This made her poems engrossing and memorable. Through her work, Plath tackles such challenging and personal issues as the breakup of her marriage, her miscarriage and her own psychiatric treatment in intense detail.

In “Elm”, the disturbing aspect of Plath’s poetry is particularly evident.  The poem addresses Plath’s fear of mental breakdown in the opening stanza. Plath uses personification to give voice to the elm, a tree closely linked to spiritualism, and allows the elm to interrogate and taunt a highly distressed woman. The elm is confident and even arrogant. It claims to “know the bottom” which is “what you fear.” The woman fears sinking further into her depression, but receives no comfort or sympathy from the tree in the following stanzas. The woman’s mental state is again alluded to in the second stanza when the elm refers to “the voice of nothing that was your madness.” Hearing voices is a very common sign of mental illness, but this line could also suggest that isolation and silence were having a negative impact on the woman’s stability.

The sixth stanza of “Elm” contains quite disturbing references to the electro-convulsive therapy Plath underwent as part of her treatment. The sun setting behind the branches of the trees is used as a metaphor for this. In this metaphor, the tree has “suffered the atrocity of sunsets” and been “scorched to the root.” As a result, its “red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.” The use of the word wires alerts the reader to the connection with Plath’s therapy. Plath feels hugely angry at having been subjected to this treatment, and has the tree respond violently: “I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs […] I must shriek.” The failure of love to console her is referred to a number of times throughout the poem. The tree mocks the woman for believing in love. It says, “Love is a shadow” and comments scornfully, “how you lie and cry after it.” Later in the poem, the image of an owl is evoked. The owl flies from the elm “nightly […] looking, with its hooks, for something to love.” This shows a conflicting attitude towards love – it is necessary, but must be violently seized using hooks. The owl will consume whatever prey it catches. Plath’s negative experiences of love appear to have led her to believe that love is a destructive force. “Elm” is an undoubtedly intense poem, with powerful images that linger long after reading.

“Child” is one of Plath’s most personal poems. It was written just weeks before her tragic death and addresses her young son, Nicholas. Although the opening line of the poem - “Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing” - initially appeared positive, I quickly realised that it indicated that Plath had lost the ability to see beauty in anything beyond her children. She had almost nothing left to live for. The poem is full of heartbreak. Plath lists what she wishes she could provide for her son – “color and ducks, The zoo of the new.” She understands that a mother’s job is to provide positive, joyful images for their child and she lists flowers that represent innocence and purity: “April snowdrop, Indian pipe.” However, in the final stanza of this short poem, her anguish is unmistakable. Although she wants to provide “grand and classical” images all she has to offer is “this troublous wringing of hands, this ceiling without a star.” The final line (“Ceiling without a star”) encapsulates Plath’s depression. For her, the world has shrunk until it is unbearably claustrophobic. Her world is full of darkness and there is not even a single star left to offer any relief. Her primary concern is not for herself, however, but for her children. In a number of her poems, she expresses fear that she will be an inadequate mother. Personal issues are never far from the surface in Plath’s poetry.

“The Arrival of the Beebox” uses an extended metaphor through which Plath discusses both the breakup of her marriage and her distressed mind. The opening stanza contains very disturbing imagery. The hive Plath has just received is compared to “the coffin of a midget or a square baby”.  I found this distressing, particularly the idea of a dead, deformed infant. However, Plath explains that “there is such a din in it”, it cannot be a coffin. From the second stanza on, the box comes to represent Plath’s own mind. She refers to it as “dangerous”, but she is irresistibly drawn to it. Once again, we get a sense of claustrophobia as the box has “no windows […] no exit.” The relationship between the buzzing of the bees and the buzzing of her thoughts is picked up in the fourth stanza when she explains “it is the noise that appals me most of all.” She describes the noise as “unintelligible syllables” and expands with “small, taken one by one, but my god together!” To be intimidated in this way by the noise and chaos in your own head must be highly upsetting.

Plath’s insecurities are explored later in the poem. In an attempt to gain control over her fear of the hive, she asserts her rights as owner, saying, “They can die, I need feed them nothing.” Her comment about feeding them leads her to contemplate whether or not they are hungry, and what they would feed on when released. She fears that “if I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree” the bees would reject her in favour of the “blond” laburnum or the pretty cherry with its “petticoats”. When the poem was written, Plath had recently separated from her husband. This has made her extremely sensitive to any perceived rebuff. The personal is again very evident in this poem. In the final line, Plath comes to some sort of resolution. “The box is only temporary” is printed as a stand-alone stanza, and serves as the poem’s conclusion. The interpretation of this line is quite difficult. It is hard to decide whether Plath is ending on a positive note, declaring that she will be able to release her thoughts safely, or hinting at the temporary nature of our bodies and alerting the reader to her self-destructive impulses.

When I first read “Mirror”, I thought it was less intense and personal than some of Plath’s other poems on our course. The speaker is the eponymous Mirror, and its tone is initially neutral. It specifically points out that it is “silver and exact” and “not cruel, only truthful”. However, as the poem develops, more and more of Plath’s habitual preoccupations emerge and the tone becomes increasingly negative. The mirror coolly observes the woman obsessively checking her reflection. She is unable to refrain from looking at herself and the mirror says proudly, “I am important to her.” She is deeply unhappy at what she sees, however: “She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.” The woman is suffering an identity crisis and searches the mirror’s “reaches for what she really is.” She is unable to establish her sense of self. The mirror becomes essential to her, and we are told that “In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman rises towards her day after day, like a terrible fish.” This is a highly disturbing image. Plath appears to fear old age and the loss of her appearance. “Terrible fish” is an extremely unusual description, but highly evocative. By this final line of the poem, the reader has discovered the intensity. The first stanza is cool and collected, but its reflection – the second stanza – is full of the anxiety and unease that is kept hidden from view. It is only by looking below the surface that it becomes evident.

“Poppies in July” offers yet another example of Plath’s ability to forge disturbing imagery from seemingly innocuous elements. From the opening line, when she describes the poppies as “little hell flames”, we are presented with disconcertingly violent and aggressive interpretations of the delicate flowers. She uses stream of consciousness to allow one idea trigger the next, and in so doing creates a series of remarkable images: “A mouth just bloodied / Little bloody skirts / nauseous capsules”. She both envies and fears the vibrancy of the poppies as they blow in the wind. Plath is in the grips of a deep depression and “it exhausts [her] to watch” the poppies. She first wishes that she could “marry a hurt like that.” Her depression has dulled her senses and she believes that the liveliness of the poppies could invigorate her. Her thoughts also tend towards the opiate-nature of poppies. If she cannot become more alive, she wishes for oblivion. She asks that the poppies’ “liquor seep to me, in this glass capsule, dulling and stilling”. The final line: “But colorless. Colorless.” is alarmingly enervating. Plath has lost all energy for life and wishes to sink into a narcotic-induced haze. The title becomes almost ironic as the end of the poem could not be further from the image conjured by “Poppies in July”.

I found Plath to be challenging and at times distressing, but throughout my study of her poetry I retained great admiration for her poetic abilities. Despite what seemed to be crippling bouts of depression, she produced poetry of startling originality, taking tired concepts and investing them with the life she could not create for herself. The intensity of her poems comes from the emotions she fills them with, the personal nature from her willingness to draw on private experiences as inspiration and the disturbing quality from the array of images she conjures to illustrate her point. When combined, these elements create a body of work that draws the reader in and keeps them there.